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PART V. TWELVE PAGES

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TWELVE PAGES PART V.

IN THE HAUNTED HOUSE OF ANTIGONISH

By FREDERICK B. EDWARDS

Drawing by FREDERIC DORR STEELE

FORTY-THREE years ago a country jury in the town of Amherst, Nova Scotia, convicted Esther Cox, a farm servant girl, of setting fire to her employer's barn. With the girl locked up in jail, "Bob Nickle," "Maggie Fisher" and other ghosts ceased to disturb the occupants of the Teed cottage in Amherst. There was no more rapping. Tables ceased to tip over and there was an end to the lighted matches that previously had "fallen from the atmosphere" and started several dangerous fires. No more were paper weights, bricks and table knives sent hurtling through the air by unseen hands.

The incarceration of Esther Cox ended the Great Amherst Mystery for all persons who did not decline to employ their powers of reason and observation. But the deviltries for which Esther Cox is now blamed continued to send shivers down the spines of a credulous multitude for long years afterward. A book written by an actor named Walter Hubbell, in which these "visitations" were treated as unquestionably of psychic origin is now in its fourth edition.

Between Esther Cox and the poltergeist (noisy ghost) of Caledonia Mills there have been many such "visitations" in Nova Scotia, so that this bleak area in Canada has become celebrated among psychical investigators for the numerous instances of isolated families being harried by mischievous spooks. That is the reason Dr. Walter F. Prince, principal research officer and acting director of the American Society for Psychical Research, consented to brave the Arctic winds that sweep down on Antigonish County. He believed that this was an excellent opportunity to make a first-hand investigation of a form of alleged psychic phenomena that has never been satisfactorily charted by the institution he represents.

Ghosts Thrive Best in Rural Districts

Somehow ghosts thrive better in the country. They are like children in that respect, although where the blush of health is brought to the cheek of a child taken to the country this same treatment gives the ghost a pallor that is everywhere recognized as the sign of true spirituality. The city is no place to keep a ghost. Just let some enterprising soul announce that he has one in his apartment and among his first visitors will be a detective sergeant bearing a warrant charging the owner of said ghost with practicing fraud and disturbing the peace and dignity of the State of New York.

The denizens of Sleepy Hollow, near Tarrytown, on the other hand, were no different from other country communities in their ideas about unseen creatures. These people of Sleepy Hollow simply have had the benefits of superior advertising. Just recall what Washington Irving said of them: "They are given to all kinds of marvelous beliefs; are subject to trances and visions, and frequently see strange sights, and hear music and voices in the air [This was before the days of radio broadcasting]. The whole neighborhood abounds with local tales, haunted spots and twilight superstitions; stars shoot and meteors glare oftener across the valley than in any other part of the country, and the nightmare, with her whole ninefold, seems to make it the favorite scene of her gambols."

Ichabod Crane is the perfect symbol of the figures that in country communities serve to keep alive all ghostly legends.

"Another of his sources of fearful pleasure," wrote Diedrich Knickerbocker, "was to pass long winter evenings with the old Dutch wives, as they sat spinning by the fire, with a row of apples roasting and sputtering along the hearth, and listen to their marvelous tales of ghosts and goblins and haunted fields and haunted brooks and haunted bridges and haunted houses and particularly of the Headless Horseman, or Galloping Hessian of the Hollow, as they sometimes called him.

"But if there was a pleasure in all this while snugly cuddling in the chimney corner of a chamber that was all of a ruddy glow from the crackling wood fire, and where of course no specter dared to show his face, it was dearly purchased by the terrors of his subsequent walk homeward. What fearful shapes and shadows beset his path amidst the dim and ghastly glare of a snowy night! With what wistful look did he eye every trembling ray of light streaming across the waste fields from some distant window! How often was he appalled by some shrub covered with snow, which, like a sheeted specter, beset his very path! How often did he shrink with curdling awe at the sound of his own steps on the frosty crust beneath his feet; and dread to look over his shoulder, lest he should behold some uncouth being trampled close beside him!"

Irving and Dr. Prince Differ in Style

That is how one of the keenest minds of literary America "prepared" his readers with one of the best ghost stories ever written. How differently does a scientist go about it! Dr. Prince a few years ago wrote for the "Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research" "A Critical Study of 'The Great Amherst Mystery.'"

"Nobody," wrote Dr. Prince, "has hitherto seemed to find time to look into the 'Great Amherst Mystery' with a critical eye and rather stiffly to demand of the ghosts what real evidence they have left on record in behalf of themselves. It is time that this were done. It is worth doing, for the case has become in its way a classic and has produced one sort of impression or another upon hundreds of thousands of people. The first question to ask in essaying this pleasant task is—

"Who are the witnesses?"

Among those mentioned by Dr. Prince were Hubbell, the actor whose book was so profitable; Dr. Carritte, an Amherst physician, and Arthur Davison, clerk of the County Court of Amherst. Most of the others who had a first-hand knowledge of the case were classified by Dr. Prince merely as "spectators."

Much of the information that was accepted by other less conscientious investigators is waived aside by Dr. Prince. An example of this is the testimony of Mrs. Teed, of which Dr. Prince wrote:

"A letter was at last obtained from Mrs. Teed on June 21, 1908. She affirmed that what her friend (the actor, Hubbell) had published was 'all true.' But this does not quite comport with what she told Mr. (Hereward) Carrington—that she thought he had dramatized and embellished it in places, which leaves us pretty much at sea again.

Spiking the Testimony Of Mrs. Teed

"Mrs. Teed adds another story, but, alas! how reasonable interrogation points crop up at every clause. Mr. and Mrs. Teed one night could see from their bed into Esther's room by moonlight (how much moonlight, and how much of her room did it light?); they saw a chair slide up from the wall to her bed (would not a string looped around the chair leg have produced the same effect, and does not the direction the chair took suggest the string?); a pillow went on from under her head into the chair (would that effect have been beyond the power of the human hand to produce in the semi-darkness?); a ghost sat down in the chair and rubbed, pinched and scratched Esther under the bedclothes (but this is what Esther said); all the furniture except the bedstead was thrown out into the entry while Esther lay quietly in bed (how much and how large was the furniture? How much of Esther's form could they see? Is it certain that it was Esther at all whom they saw on the bed, for rolls of clothing and artfully arranged cushions have been known to deceive in a poor light?); then another ghost rocked the bed (is it not probable that Esther was in bed now, at any rate?); at length Esther was brought to sleep in the same room with the others, whereupon the manifestations ceased (because of the better opportunities for observation?), except that once the lid of a trunk gave 'one parting slam' (was the trunk conveniently near Esther's mattress? Was the interval before the parting slam long enough to allow the Teeds to fall into that state, congenial to the night, wherein eyes watch not?)

"Even the story of the lively dishpan told by Mrs. Teed to Mr. Carrington is not convincing as she told it, even though 'Esther was not near the pan' (is not 'three feet' tolerably near?), and she was walking away from it when the pan hopped up and fell on the floor. The writer finds by experiment that a string looped in the ring of a dishpan on the further side and passing over the shoulder to the hand of a person walking away produces the same effect that a ghostly hand would, provided that the light is dim and the onlooker does not occupy a favorable position."

So it goes, this critical study of "The Great Amherst Mystery," and, taken all together, it is enough to cause any lover o... Poe's shiver-producing tales to thank heaven that Walter F. Prince was not editor of the magazine that first printed the delightful yarns of that genius.

Properly to appreciate the tremendous importance of the Caledonia Mills affair to the people of Nova Scotia, and especially to the people of that particular part of Nova Scotia, it is necessary that the reader should understand the underlying causes of this remarkable exhibition of community panic, for that is what it is. Because of their hereditary racial characteristics their habits of thought, their mode of life and the circumstances under which they live the people of the isolated districts of this particular part of Canada are unusually sensitive to supernatural suggestion. Caledonia Mills is not so far from Broadway by mile measurement. By any other standard it is in another world.

Caledonia Mills is a trifling collection of half a dozen scattered farmhouses in Guysboro County, N. S., on the border line between Guysboro and Antigonish. The settlement is so remote from what the average New Yorker understands by the word civilization that it is difficult for said average New Yorkers to understand what life in Caledonia Mills means.

No railroad runs anywhere near Caledonia Mills. There are no automobiles, no traffic cops, no streetcars, no movies, no electric light, gas, telephones, bandits, bucketshops or bootleggers at Caledonia Mills. There are probably elderly people in the community who have never seen a train or a streetcar or a telephone. If you want to get to Caledonia Mills from Antigonish Town or any other nearby center you either walk or drive behind a horse. Candles and oil lanterns supply illumination and oil is hard to get.

The people of this part of Canada are principally of Highland Scottish descent and every other family is a MacDonald, and the MacGillivrays are not far behind. It is inevitable that there should be MacDonalds and MacGillivrays in this affair. You couldn't keep them out. In politics, art, religion, science, trade, sport or social life it is impossible to move more than a step or so in this part of Canada without bumping against a MacDonald.

They are a simple-minded, honest people, intensely religious, superstitious by ancestry and natural inclination, stubborn in their convictions, self-sufficient and self-centered. With their ancient Highland tradition for religious fervor, depth of conviction and stubborn adherence to their own point of view they are subjected through their mode of living to the additional influences of an almost monastic seclusion and hard, unrelieved toil for their daily bread. The only industry is farming and when the coming of winter shuts in the land they are driven indoors to sit around a red-hot box stove in which hard wood logs crackle, there to commune among themselves on religion, politics—and ghosts.

The MacDonald property at Caledonia Mills, scene of this latest outbreak of supernaturalism, is typical. There is a frame house of two stories, containing a living room, "parlor" and a small bedroom on the ground floor, with a lean-to kitchen built on the north side of the house. Upstairs are three Spartan bedrooms. Fifty yards from the house is the barn, larger in structure than the house itself, which provides winter shelter for the season's hay crop, the one horse and the half-dozen cows. House and barn are of frame structure, single planked and loosely shingled. The farm is on the backbone of an upland ridge of ground which dominates Antigonish County on one side and Guysboro County on the other.

In both directions the place is open to the driving blasts which sweep across the country from the nearby North Atlantic shore. Around the house are a few acres of cleared land; behind, stretching to the horizon, endless forests of pine and spruce, with occasional spindling birches. A bleak, desolate, comfortless outpost at the best of times. In winter, with the nearest neighbor two miles away, a bitter materialization of the spirit of loneliness.

DR. WALTER FRANKLIN PRINCE, secretary of the American Society for Psychical Research, last Wednesday made a report on the ghostly manifestations at the MacDonald home. Dr. Prince thinks the fires were due to Mary Ellen, the adopted daughter of the MacDonalds, but holds that she is not mentally capable, being "exceedingly young for her years" in development of mind. The fires, he says, were mostly within reach of a person five feet tall, which is the girl's height. He found evidence that some were started with matches. Also, he finds that there is no evidence that they broke out "where the girl could not have been a few minutes earlier." He says he found bottles of inflammable liquids on beams in the kitchen. He offered the explanation that Mary Ellen probably did these things, including tying knots in the tails of the MacDonald cattle, while she was in "an altered state of consciousness." Consequently, he does not regard her as "morally culpable." As for those investigators in the house who said they were slapped, Dr. Prince said he had found by experiment that one of them was a medium of psychical manifestations and was susceptible to "volcanic outbursts of automatic writing." He discredits the statement that wireless waves may have caused the manifestations.

MacDonalds in a State Of Frantic Fear

In this stark setting up to a few weeks ago lived Alexander MacDonald, sixty-five years old, or thereabouts, his wife, and their adopted daughter, Mary Ellen, whose age is fifteen. They have not lived there since January 12 last, when seemingly frantic with fear, they moved their small belongings to an empty house two miles away, driven from their old home by a series of uncanny happenings.

Mystery on the MacDonald farm, although reaching its explosion point only a few weeks ago, is not new. Almost a year ago there were reported occurrences which had the valley folks completely puzzled. These manifestations affected only the MacDonald cattle in the MacDonald barn. The farmer, tying up his stock for the night, would return to the barn a few minutes later and find his cows kicking up their heels in the pasture; yet no member of his household would admit having untied them. On several occasions knots in the tails of the cows caused him the deepest consternation and his cows a great deal of personal discomfort. Then the fine weather came and the cattle were no longer disturbed. The summer and autumn were peaceful and the family settled down to its cheerless winter routine of limited activity and unlimited time, but no further disturbing mischances were reported until last January.

The first manifestation occurred, the MacDonalds say, on January 6. In the kitchen Mrs. MacDonald discovered a blazing lump of what appeared to be cotton wool. She had been absent from the room only for a moment or two and was positive that the wool had not been in the kitchen previously to her discovery. Also, she was confident that she had not seen cotton of that kind in the house for many months previously and that there was no cotton of that kind in the house at that time. The other members of the family agreed with her. None of them had any knowledge of any such material in the house.

The fires continued. They broke out in the middle of the night, in the early evening and in the early morning. There were a dozen or more such manifestations in the kitchen, in the dining room and in the upstairs rooms. Sometimes flames burst from the floors and sometimes from the walls. In no case, so far as the three persons say who lived in the house and who are the only witnesses of these earlier manifestations, was there any previous evidence of the existence of the burning substance anywhere around the house.

There were strange noises heard; noises which are variously described as "hollow thumps," and "scrapings." These continued during the whole period of the mysterious fires, but were not apparently connected with them. The noises were intermittent, but occurred chiefly at night.

So far the manifestations had been confined to the MacDonald family. The stories spread and Duncan MacDonald, a relative and a neighbor, and Dan and Leo McGillivray, other neighbors, visited the house and examined the burn scars left on the walls, floors and furniture by the mysterious fires.

Leaving the house at dusk one evening, the MacGillivray brothers say they saw an arm thrust out of an upstairs window waving a white cloth. The arm itself was a chalky white, and after waving the cloth slowly for a few minutes it was withdrawn. Returning at once to the house, they told of what they believed they had seen. The MacDonalds say that no member of the family had gone upstairs during the interval between the departure of the MacGillivrays and their return.

On the night of January 11 the fires started so frequently that Mrs. MacDonald and Mary Ellen fled the house to call assistance. They were afraid that if they slept the house would burn over their heads. During their absence two new fires broke out, which MacDonald smothered, one of them in the kitchen and one on the stairs. The next day the entire MacDonald family left the old homestead and took up residence in an unoccupied house a mile and a half away. The MacDonald home became one of those frightful things—a haunted house.

No Ghost Was Ever Better Advertised

Meanwhile news of these things had been sent abroad. Harold B. Whidden, correspondent of "The Halifax Herald" at Antigonish Town, supplied his newspaper with a short account of the happenings. The paper was interested, and asked Whidden for complete details, which were supplied. The entire population of Nova Scotia began to take an interest in the Caledonia Mills ghost. Hundreds of suggestions were offered to the newspapers in explanation of the mystery. These ranged from frank statements of belief that the fires were the work of some incubus to elaborate explanations by amateur scientists who offered spontaneous combustion, electricity, gun cotton and potassium chloride as possible mediums through which a practical joker might be working.

The h'ant grew to be a serious matter in Nova Scotia. People everywhere were taking the facts and elaborating them to fit some peculiar personal theory. One elderly woman in Halifax convinced herself that the Caledonia Mills ghost portended the approach of the end of the world, declined to go to bed for fear she wouldn't hear Gabriel's trumpet and became seriously ill through lack of sleep. School children in lonely localities were afraid to go out after nightfall, and all the old stories of witchcraft, banshees, little people, werewolves, and personal devils were revived and exchanged and expounded until the entire community suffered from nervous shock and the banging of a door after dark was sufficient to send an entire family into hysterics. Newspapers outside Nova Scotia began to bombard "The Herald" office for news of the latest developments; preachers preached sermons on it, and lawyers and laymen wrote letters to the editors.

Challenged by some of these letter writers, "The Herald" planned an investigation on its own account. Whidden, a young man of good family, educated, and with a good war record as a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces, volunteered to sleep in the haunted house. The newspaper persuaded Peter Owen Carroll, known all over Nova Scotia as "Peachy" Carroll, to accompany the reporter. Carroll is a police detective, not the most brilliant Sherlock Holmes in the world, perhaps, but honest and experienced in dealing with small town criminals and proud of his record of never having fallen down on such cases as were presented for his investigations. He is a former Chief of Police of Pictou, N. S.

Carroll and Whidden went to Caledonia Mills on Tuesday, February 7, and stayed in the MacDonald house until Thursday, February 9, sleeping there two nights. For part of this time they were alone in the house, at other times MacDonald stayed with them. They slept on the floor in the kitchen in their clothes. Mrs. MacDonald cooked them food, which MacDonald brought to them through the snow.

Whidden's Own Story Of a Trying Night

In the words of Whidden's story to "The Halifax Herald": "We employed most of the hours of the day trying to keep warm. This was impossible. We kept a roaring fire in the sheet iron stove in the dining room. The doors leading into the kitchen, parlor and small bed room were all closed and fastened, but the dining room could not be heated enough for comfort. A blizzard raged all day."

On Wednesday evening, after the storm had died down, the investigators were visited by Dan and Leo McGillivray and Duncan MacDonald. They played cards until about 10:30, when the two McGillivrays and Duncan MacDonald returned home. Carroll, Whidden and Alexander MacDonald remained in the house all night. Then Whidden writes:

"Shortly after our guests took their departure, Mr. MacDonald lay down on the rugs. About 11:30 I lay down also, leaving Detective Carroll sitting by the fire smoking. I asked him to call me if he saw or heard anything strange. It was impossible for me to sleep, it was so cold. At 12 o'clock, the de-

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The MacDonald farm, where the haunting took—or didn't take—place. Better than no company at all, one might say of a visiting spook